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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [PL](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: POLAND: SNAPSHOT OF BIALYSTOK, NEAR THE BELARUS
BORDER

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR DAN SAINZ FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)
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¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Local and regional officials in Poland's northeastern Podlaskie Province -- located along the Belarusian border -- told us April 1-3 that residents still viewed the U.S. as Poland's main security guarantor but have been shifting their focus towards the EU over the past five years. Many believe the U.S. "undervalues" Poland as a strategic partner, citing Poland's exclusion from the visa waiver program. On the economic front, officials assert that the region is weathering the global financial crisis relatively well, but the social welfare system is strained by unemployed Poles returning from abroad. Local officials described relations with regional Belarusian counterparts as increasingly warm and productive, but complained of stone-walling by senior officials in Minsk. END SUMMARY.

SHIFTING FOCUS TOWARDS THE EU, FEELING UNDERVALUED BY THE U.S.

¶2. (C) Officials in Bialystok, capital of Podlaskie Province, characterized the U.S. as a vital partner for Poland, particularly in the security sphere, but said the focus of the region's population had been shifting towards the EU since Poland's 2004 accession. Provincial Speaker Jaroslaw Dworzanski -- a member of the ruling Civic Platform (PO) -- argued that the U.S. was no longer the "golden destination" for local residents and therefore interest in the United States was waning. Governor of Podlaskie Province Maciej Zywno (PO) noted that young people were increasingly traveling to Europe rather than the U.S. for vacation, studies, and work, mainly because of the EU's proximity and visa-free travel regime.

¶3. (C) Many interlocutors in Bialystok claimed the U.S. undervalued Poland as a strategic ally. Local officials, professors, students, and journalists in Bialystok repeatedly cited Poland's exclusion from the U.S. visa program as the most tangible evidence of the U.S. "not taking us seriously as a partner." Dworzanski, as well as several college professors, said there was considerable public disappointment with the government's decision to buy F-16's, which the professors portrayed as "broken planes that shouldn't have been sold to a NATO partner." In addition, city council members from all major political parties expressed disappointment that Poland's deployment in Iraq had not yielded economic benefits for Poles.

WEATHERING THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS

¶4. (SBU) Regarding the economic situation, local and regional officials said Podlaskie Province was "taking some punches," but weathering the global financial crisis fairly well. The main challenge local officials face is the increasing strain on social welfare services resulting from the return of unemployed Poles from abroad. In addition, large firms that

had failed to restructure are now being forced to close or halt production.

15. (C) Provincial officials acknowledged that the poor transport infrastructure in the Podlaskie province had hindered the region's growth. Dworzanski said local officials had faced an uphill challenge in learning how to compete for and implement EU infrastructure funds, but now they were much more effective. Bialystok is in the process of issuing municipal bonds to cover its portion of the road construction costs under EU requirements, but city council members refused to speculate on whether the initiative would succeed.

BELARUSIANS IN BIALYSTOK "WELL TREATED"

16. (C) Belarusian Union leader Eugeniusz Wappa and other members of the Belarusian community, which comprises 20-25 percent of the region's population, said they participated fully in the political process, took advantage of increased opportunities to learn Belarusian in public schools, and were treated well by the Poles. On the political front, Wappa said Belarusians play an influential role at the local level but were poorly organized at the national and EU level. The majority of Belarusians appear to support the PO, which has a reputation in the province for being the party most tolerant of minorities. Ethnic Belarusians occupy four of the 28 seats in the city assembly, according to Marek Masalki, who represents ethnic Belarusians. Regarding President Lukashenka, Bialystok Mayor Tadeusz Truskolaski observed that a small minority of ethnic Belarusians strongly supported the

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Belarusian President and a small minority vocally opposed him, but the vast majority remained silent on the issue.

LINKS TO BELARUS: LOW-KEY AND PRODUCTIVE

17. (C) Local and regional officials in Bialystok said they maintained friendly, productive, and low-profile relations with Belarusian counterparts. They complained, however, that relations took a noticeable turn for the worse when higher-ranking Belarusian officials from Minsk get involved in projects. Higher-ranking officials in Belarus are also more hesitant to make decisions. Bialystok has a student exchange program with Grodno (about 50 students per year), and athletic exchanges with several cities in Belarus; the city supports charitable work for children in Grodno, Minsk and Lida.

18. (C) Bialystok officials complained that political and economic cooperation with Belarus was disrupted by Poland's accession to the Schengen zone. They advocated including Bialystok in a visa-free travel zone with Belarus, but predicted strong EU resistance. They noted that visiting Belarusians sell black market gasoline, cigarettes, and vodka. They also buy food and household products.

ORTHODOX CHURCH ON BIALYSTOK AND MINSK

19. (C) According to Orthodox Archbishop Jakub, the Orthodox Church's relationship with local and regional authorities has improved significantly since the PO took power. The Archbishop characterized relations with the previous Law and Justice (PiS) government as "terrible." The PiS government had dismissed government workers affiliated with the Orthodox Church from jobs and frequently excluded the Church from participating in public celebrations organized by local and regional authorities. He said that current PO authorities were working to make all religions and ethnic groups feel included in the political process, a strong contrast from the conservative PiS or left-wing parties.

¶10. (C) Turning to Belarusian President Lukashenka, Archbishop Jakub said he met the Belarusian President and found him to be imperfect, but not terrible. The Archbishop argued that conditions in Minsk had improved considerably over the past decade and that there were no mass emigrations from Belarus. He downplayed charges by the Orthodox Church in Belarus that the Lukashenka regime was overtaxing the Church and extorting bribes for construction permits.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) As relations between Belarus and Poland gradually warm, Podlaskie Province's ties with Belarus will also likely deepen, given the region's proximity to the border and large ethnic Belarusian population. Bialystok's leaders have the opportunity to exert a positive influence on regional and local Belarusian leaders by sharing their first-hand knowledge of economic transition and democracy-building. At a minimum, they are willing to share their insights on Belarus with us on a more regular basis.

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